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Beyond China: Australia and Asia's northern democracies

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DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Craig Mark is affiliated with Kwansei Gakuin University

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Julia Gillard needs to do more to impress in South Korea. AAP/Adam Gartrell

AUSTRALIA IN THE ASIAN CENTURY – A series examining Australia's role in the rapidly transforming Asian region. Delivered in partnership with the Australian government.

Here, Dr Craig Mark – currently based in Japan – argues that with all the talk of China, we are at risk of ignoring more democratic powers in Asia's north.

Among all the attention given to Australia's relationship with China, good relations with the other states of Northeast Asia are no less important.

Japan and South Korea are Australia's next largest export markets, and unlike China, share Australia's democratic political values. And the oft-overlooked Mongolia, experiencing a resource boom of its own, will be of great importance as we enter the Asian century.

Japan

The security relationship between Australia and Japan has steadily grown over the past two decades, to the extent that Japan is now Australia's second-closest security partner, after the United States.

The ADF (Australian Defence Force) and JSDF (Japan Self-Defence Forces) have operated together in deployments as far back as the UN Cambodian peacekeeping operation in the early 1990s, again in East Timor, and in Iraq.

Joint naval exercises have increased, and both navies have cooperated in the multinational anti-piracy operations in the Indian Ocean. More covertly, intelligence cooperation is believed to be increasing, particularly after Australia and Japan signed their first treaty-level defence agreement, the **Acquisitions and Cross-Servicing Agreement**, in May 2010.

Japan's whaling program remains the main sticking point in its relations with the international community, and particularly with Australia, as the Sea Shepherd activist group uses Australian ports in its annual anti-whaling cruises.

The increasing expense for a declining catch and political pressure both within and outside of Japan may encourage the Japanese to **abandon the program** altogether in future. Sadly, there is no indication of this at present.

South Korea

Since moving to democracy in the 1980s, South Korea's economic growth has been of great importance to Australia, becoming our third largest export market.

Migration to Australia has seen the growth of a substantial Korean community. Korean students, working holiday makers and tourists provide a **key component** of these valuable markets for Australia.

But in her recent trip to Korea for the Nuclear Security Summit, it appeared prime minister Julia Gillard was **not as sensitive** to Korean concerns as would be desirable, seeming to ignore questions from Korean students.

South Korea, of course, always has to confront North Korea, whose WMD program is **potentially destabilising** for the whole region. Japan's military has been on **increased alert** due to the recent failed North Korean rocket test.

The Japanese have deployed anti-ballistic missile systems to Okinawa, and increased JSDF forces in its southern islands overall.

While not directly involved, Australia certainly has an interest in strengthening non-proliferation measures against North Korea. We are after all a founding member of the **Proliferation Security Initiative**, aimed at denying North Korea access to nuclear-related materials.

To this end, Australia should continue to press for nuclear arms control, counter-proliferation and nuclear security, as outlined in the **International Commission on Nuclear Non-proliferation and Disarmament**.

Mongolia

Often overlooked in the scope of Northeast Asian relations is Mongolia. A democracy since the end of the Cold War, with parliamentary elections due in June, the nation is presently undergoing its **own mining boom**.

Australian mining companies are **already engaging** in joint ventures for exploration and in mines already under development. New opportunities are rising to pursue positive relations with this rapidly developing nation.

Indicating a desire to align itself more closely to the West, Mongolia has also **contributed troops** to the US-led multinational deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan, and to UN peacekeeping missions in Kosovo, Sierra Leone, Chad and the Congo.

Mongolia has long held an important strategic position between China and Russia, which remains a Pacific power via its Far East region. There is a large minority population across the border in the Chinese province of Inner Mongolia, where there are more ethnic Mongolians than in Mongolia itself.

This had led to accusations that Mongolians in China have long had their **rights and ethnic identity suppressed**, as with the Tibetans, and the Uighurs in Xinjiang province.

Tricky territory

As well as these conflicts, Japan has long-running territorial disputes with Russia over the Kuril Islands, and with China over the Senkaku Islands.

Even more contentious is the maritime dispute over the South China Sea, primarily based around the Spratly Islands. China claims the entire area as its territory, which is contested by Vietnam, Malaysia, the Philippines, Brunei, and Taiwan.

While Australia has no direct part in all these controversies, it does have very a real interest in ensuring the shipping lanes through which our most of our trade flows are not disrupted by any deterioration of the security situation in Eastern Asia.

Fortunately, at the moment most states in the region, including China, appear to be no less concerned about defusing these tensions diplomatically.

By remaining an active participant in the multilateral diplomatic institutions of the region, such as the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation forum (APEC) and the East Asia Summit, Australia can play its part in ensuring relations in our region remain peaceful.

But, given our increased military cooperation with the USA, and with other nations such as Japan, there is a real danger we are taking sides in a looming contest between the “great powers” for hegemony in the Asia-Pacific.

This is part three of Australia in the Asian Century. You can read other instalments by clicking the links below:

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Australia should be very careful about the nature and extent of its involvement in north east asia. This is an area where the past looms very large over the present with many problems unresolved. Of course there is trade but it is the politics of the area which are supremely important. The contemporary Japanese and South Korean states are very much initial creations of US foreign policy and continuing American presence there is not necessarily a factor contributing to stability...

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Interesting survey Craig.

Australia has a lot of catching up to actually ... we don't have a very helpful history in our dealings with the neighbours - from the White Australia Policy to Vietnam and lots in the middle. We have been long perceived - we have perceived ourselves - as an outpost of England surrounded by lesser, somewhat menacing, backwaters.

Of course when you talk about Asian democracies this is a pretty seriously qualified sort of democracy from our perspective and there are...

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It's refreshing to here other voices on 'Asia'. The reality that Asia is more than China and there are other societies that are open, developed and select their governments in open ballots. Australia has become very one-eyed.

The extractive industries are important, but if Australia wishes to remain a first world, technologically advanced nation it's needs to do more than break rocks open and ship the pieces. China has developed very quickly from a very low base in terms of infrastructure...

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